Unlocking Potential for Learning

Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

Case Study Report
York Region District School Board

Series Editors:
Carol Campbell
Michael Fullan
Avis Glaze

Unlocking Potential for Learning

Effective District-Wide Strategies
to Raise Student Achievement
in Literacy and Numeracy

Case Study Report
York Region District School Board
Carmen Maggisano and Carol Campbell

Contents

Cette publication est disponible en français

PREFACE

Schools and school systems all across the world are seeking ways of improving student achievement to respond to the growing public recognition of the importance of education for individual and societal progress and success. Ontario has adopted an exciting approach to supporting school improvement that is research and evidence based. Unlike many jurisdictions around the world that have adopted simplistic practices, Ontario has recognized that sustained improvement depends on schools, districts, and provinces adopting an aligned approach that builds the capacity of teachers, school leaders, boards, district leaders, parents, and community allies. Ontario is putting that approach into practice in elementary schools through the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and Secretariat, and in secondary schools through the Student Success Strategy. In both strategies, the Ministry of Education is closely working with schools and school districts to develop common approaches to meaningful change focused on improved school and classroom practices. We recognize that within these broad parameters there can be many different ways to proceed, taking into account the diverse demographics and contexts of Ontario schools. The initial evidence is that these strategies are working. All the indicators of student progress are improving, and there is a renewed sense of energy and optimism in schools about the future. At the same time, we recognize that we are only at the beginning of the road.

The case studies in this collection illustrate the terrific work being done in boards as well as the significant challenges that must be addressed. The researchers and authors describe in detail the strategies being used by boards to create enthusiasm, to build teacher skills, to develop strong leadership, to involve the community, and to use data to guide improvement. They show that improvement must always be a collective effort no matter how significant a role some individuals may play. They show that the school cannot do it alone although the school must also be committed to the possibility of improvement. They show the importance of tenacity and, as Robert Slavin put it, "the unrelenting pursuit of success for students."

The cases in the Unlocking Potential for Learning series also show that while this great work is going on boards and schools must also manage a diverse range of other tasks and pressures. The realities of day-to-day schooling and board management cannot be left unattended either. It is indeed a fine balancing act, but these very diverse cases show how it can be – is being – done. They provide inspiration, ideas, and a map of sorts for other school leaders while also making it clear that the route will look a little different in each situation.

I am honoured to write some words of introduction to this collection, but even more to work with Ontario educators and communities for the benefit of our children. No cause is more worthy of our effort.

Ben Levin
Deputy Minister of Education
September, 2006

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains a case study of a district in Ontario, York Region District School Board, that is demonstrating strategies to achieve district-wide improvement in literacy and numeracy at the elementary school level. This is one of eight case studies from the Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy research project conducted by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. In this introduction, we put the case studies in context. First, we outline the provincial commitment and strategy for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Second, we describe the Effective District-Wide Strategies project, from which this case is derived, and highlight the overall findings from this project.

In 2003, as part of a new government initiative, Ontario launched a major province-wide strategy to achieve substantial improvements in student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The starting point for reform was a five-year period of limited improvement in the percentage of 12-year-old students (Grade 6) achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy, based on provincial assessments as carried out by the independent agency – the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

A key element of the government's strategy included the establishment of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work in partnership with school districts and schools to support improvement in student achievement. Nine key strategies have under-pinned the Secretariat's work:

1. Work with school boards to set achievement targets.

2. Assemble and support teams at all levels to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy.

3. Reduce class sizes in the primary grades to a maximum of 20 students per class by 2007–08.

4. Build capacity to support student learning and achievement.

5. Allocate resources to support target setting and improvement planning for literacy and numeracy.

6. Mobilize the system to provide equity in student outcome.

7. Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement to build support for the literacy and numeracy initiative.

8. Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making.

9. Establish a growing presence on the national and international scene in learning from and contributing to the knowledge base about how to improve literacy and numeracy achievement.

The proposition was how to mobilize trilevel reform engagement in improvement – the school and community, the district, and the government. We undertook to proactively use the change knowledge – what we call "capacity building with a focus on results" – to achieve major results within a short period of time. Some schools and districts were already moving in this direction – in this sense they were ahead of the government – but the new goal was to have system-wide change in all districts and school authorities.

The Secretariat is committed to fostering inquiry and identification of effective practices. This is reflected in our mission to challenge ourselves, educators, and the community to seek out best thinking and build upon effective practices to maximize student achievement in literacy and numeracy. One initiative along these lines – the one we report here – was to identify what is known on the ground about district-wide reform. We set out to identify districts that a) had seemed to have sound strategies at work, and b) were getting results as indicated by trends in EQAO assessments. What we wanted to know was what was going on under different conditions as districts went about this difficult and important work. The district case studies reported in this series are part of our strategic approach to inquiry in which we derive lessons from Ontario's education system on an ongoing basis and report these findings and learning back to Ontario's educators to inform practice and contribute to improvement. We know that together we can make a significant difference for student achievement through unlocking potential for learning.

The Effective District Strategies project began in summer 2005. The purpose of the project was to identify districts in Ontario that are demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements. We identified eight districts from 72 districts in Ontario for the project. The eight districts were deliberately selected to represent a wide range of sizes, locations, and contexts. In terms of student populations, three of the districts are small (fewer than 500 students in Grade 6 in 2004–05), three are medium sized (1000–2000 Grade 6 students), and two are large (over 3000 students in Grade 6). However, the student numbers only tell part of the story. The districts with small student numbers cover large geographical areas, with the challenges of remoteness and dispersed communities. The large districts contain concentrated urban and suburban communities, with diverse populations combining areas of affluence in close proximity to disadvantaged communities.

Ontario has French, English, public, and Catholic education systems. The eight districts were selected across each of these systems. One district is French-language and seven are English-language. Five districts are within the Catholic education system, whereas three are in the public system. All eight are publicly funded.

All eight districts are committed to raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy and have demonstrated improvement over time. The provincial goal is to have 75 per cent of students at or above the provincial standard in EQAO Grade 6 assessments. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is working in partnership with boards across Ontario to achieve this result. This project is part of The Secretariat's work to unlock potential for learning by sharing successful practices. The project has, however, not just focused on high-achieving boards, but also on growth and improvement in both lower- and higher-performing boards. This has enabled The Secretariat to identify effective practices for districts at different stages of improvement and achievement levels and to learn lessons across the range of contexts and experiences in Ontario.

The case study districts do not offer exact blueprints for success, but rather provide concrete examples of what effective strategies look like in practice. The project's research questions focused around three key areas of enquiry. We list these here

to enable the reader to reflect on how you would answer these questions in relation to your own context:

1. District's Strategy and Actions

   - What is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

   - What is the main purpose driving this approach and what are the goals to be achieved?

   - What strategies and actions are in place on a district-wide basis?

   - What is the structure and operation of the district to support a focus on student achievement?

   - What are the roles and responsibilities of key individual postholders within the district?

2. Connections Between District and Schools

   - Has a shared focus on literacy and/or numeracy been fostered across all schools?

   - At the school level, what initiatives and actions have taken place to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

   - What is the relationship between the district and schools in supporting literacy/numeracy improvements?

   - How does the district challenge all schools to improve?

   - What types of support do schools receive from the district?

   - How is professional learning shared within and across schools?

3. Impact of District's Strategies and Actions and Future Developments

   - Overall, how effective is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

- What specific strategies and actions have been most effective?

- What have been the main difficulties encountered and how have these been addressed?

- How can improvements become sustainable?

- What further developments are planned or required to improve student achievement district-wide?

- What has been the key learning for the district in improving student achievement in literacy and/or numeracy?

- What lessons have been learned of relevance to other districts and/or for province-wide reform?

The research method involved visits to each of the eight districts. Interviews were conducted with members of the senior administrative teams (directors of education and supervisory officers/superintendents) and other relevant central staff (e.g., curriculum co-ordinators, consultants, coaches). A sample of school principals was interviewed in each district. School visits involving further discussion with principals and with teachers and other staff, plus classroom observations, were also undertaken. Through this approach, the project attempted to gather views from the central office and from the school, and to compare and contrast these perspectives. We were interested in exploring the connections between districts and schools in system improvement and the ways in which effective districts foster collective commitment and responsibilities for student achievement.

Across the eight districts, we identified 12 key components of effective practices that link to four broad strategic areas (see Figure 1). Our focus in this project was on effective district-wide strategies for both system and school improvement. The 12 components are relevant at district, school, and classroom levels. Indeed, in effective districts these features form an interactive framework for action, district-wide and within schools.

LEADING WITH PURPOSE AND FOCUSING DIRECTION

DESIGNING A COHERENT STRATEGY, CO-ORDINATING IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEWING OUTCOMES

RAISING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

DEVELOPING PRECISION IN KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND DAILY PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING LEARNING

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Figure 1

One strategic area is *Leading with Purpose and Focusing Direction*. This area encompasses three key components. The first component is *leadership for learning*, which involves both individual and collective leadership to support improvement in professional learning and student learning. The second component is establishing *vision and shared focus* on student achievement as the priority. The third component is ensuring that a sense of *moral purpose* informs strategies and practices to unlock potential for improvement. This moral purpose includes the overall importance of education for economic and social development plus daily practices to support students' character, emotional, and social development.

Another strategic area is *Designing a Coherent Strategy, Co-ordinating Implementation, and Reviewing Outcomes*. This includes four key components. The first component is the development of a *coherent overarching strategy* for student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The second component is the *identification and allocation of resources* prioritized to the system focus on improved student achievement. A third component is the effective *organization* at district, school, and classroom levels to support student achievement, including attention to the roles and responsibilities of staff. The fourth component is the routine use of system and school-level *monitoring and review* of targets and outcomes achieved, reviewing progress to inform future action and holding to account schools and system leaders for improvement.

The next strategic area is *Developing Precision in Knowledge, Skills, and Daily Practices for Improving Learning*. This involves three key components. One component is attention to *capacity building* to extend professional learning, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy instruction, assessment for learning, classroom management, and instructional leadership. A second component is careful attention to *curriculum development, instruction*, and *interventions* to improve teaching and learning for all students system-wide and within schools. The third component is the regular use and understanding of data at the system and school level and the development of assessment literacy within schools to ensure instruction is informed by data about student learning and progress.

The final strategic area is *Sharing Responsibility through Building Partnerships*. This involves two key components. First is the fostering of *partnerships* within the system, for example, between central office and schools and across schools, and with parents, communities, and other organizations and agencies to build shared involvement in, and responsibilities for, supporting student learning. This requires the second component of clear *communication*, where a consistent message about raising student achievement is communicated widely, frequently, and with a sense of urgency.

While each of the above four broad areas can be explored in isolation, for example, focusing on leadership or on instruction, it is their combined strength that is vital. As Figure 1 indicates, each is a piece of the jigsaw of unlocking the potential for district-wide reform. A district that is strong on only one or two of these components will not achieve its full potential. It is important to note that the components are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact and influence each other in practice.

In the *Unlocking Potential for Learning* series, we will be publishing selected case studies from the districts involved in this project to share their experiences, strategies, and practices for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

Unlocking the potential for learning through district-wide reform involves several requirements. First, the overall system – the province – must expect, foster, and support districts to take focused action. Second, it is necessary, as we have shown in this initiative, to identify cases in which specific strategies are in place so that we can examine what they look like in practice. Even with this increased precision, it is difficult to detail specifically how to make all districts effective, as there are no

universal blueprints for success. The combination of strategies and the influence of local contexts, needs, and experiences will vary in the implementation and outcomes of similar practices in different contexts. To a certain extent, districts must identify and review their own particular current state and their future development, drawing on the best knowledge from evidence of successful practices locally and beyond. This could include comparing a district's existing strategies and actions against the 12 components identified above and reviewing the examples provided in the case study report.

We know from past research that neither top-down, prescriptive strategies nor bottom-up, site-based strategies alone work. What is needed is a blend of the two. In trilevel reform, the district, as the mid part of the "tri", is in a vital position to reconcile and harness top-down and bottom-up forces needed for large-scale reform. In essence, this is what unlocking potential is all about.

Carol Campbell, Michael Fullan, and Avis Glaze
Series Editors

Executive Summary

This case presents lessons learned from the experiences of one Ontario district school board in its efforts to build school and district capacity and coherence while implementing early literacy strategies.

Board Profile

The York Region District School Board (YRDSB) is a growing school board, opening, on average, five elementary schools a year for the last five years, and one secondary school every other year. There are currently 140 elementary schools and 28 secondary schools in the board, with over 108,000 students and 8,000 teachers (Sharratt & Fullan, 2005).

Data Collection

Data collection included: interviews with the senior leadership team and 12 school principals, a review of school board documents and EQAO data, and observations of the Literacy Collaborative (LC), a district-wide initiative focused on enhancing literacy for all students through the support of all schools and teachers.

Literacy Collaborative

1) Shared Beliefs and Understandings

Leaders in LC schools must not only share certain beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning, but they must also "walk the talk" by taking action to demonstrate that they believe:

a) *All* students can meet high standards given the right time and support.

b) *All* teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance.

c) High expectations and early intervention are essential.

d) Teachers need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do (Hill & Crevola, 1999).

2) Embedded Literacy Teachers

This role was initially shared by a half-time Reading Recovery™ teacher and a half-time literacy teacher – allocated from within school staffing; now all elementary and secondary schools are provided with a literacy teacher so that all schools can be part of the LC. No one can say, "It's impossible to find the staffing." The literacy teacher works alongside classroom teachers modelling/demonstrating successful literacy practice – it is not a matter of withdrawing students who need help from the classroom learning environment.

In the selection of literacy teachers, the following characteristics are key:

a) strong interpersonal/facilitation skills (required for classroom coaching)

b) strong assessment and instructional knowledge in balanced literacy

c) ongoing commitment to being a lead literacy learner

3) Timetabled Literacy Block

The literacy block, at least 100 uninterrupted minutes per day, should be scheduled in the morning to emphasize:

a) focused time on task on balanced literacy assessment and instruction;

b) no distractions or interruptions such as announcements, field trips, or assemblies during this dedicated literacy time; and

c) alignment of the literacy teacher's daily timetable with the literacy block.

4) Full Implementation of Reading Recovery™

This program supports literacy by identifying the lowest-achieving children in every Grade 1 class and moving these children to read and write at the average level so that they are able to benefit from good classroom instruction.

Principals must:

a) select competent and experienced primary teachers to be trained in Reading Recovery™;

b) ensure that *daily* lessons support the lowest-achieving individual students; and

c) commit to providing access to daily Reading Recovery™ instruction for all children who need it.

5) Principal Leadership

The principal's deep structural understanding of successful literacy practices in classrooms is key. Therefore, principals in the LC must be committed to:

a) attending *all* regional literacy professional development sessions with their literacy leadership team;

b) focusing on school data to improve student achievement; and

c) staying the course/maintaining the literacy plan, outlined in the school plan, until improvement is achieved.

6) Case Management Approach

In order to use data to drive instruction and select resources, the LC model recommends the use of a case management approach to:

a) put an individual face on the data so that teachers know which students need more support (e.g., daily guided reading in the classroom, booster group support, reading buddies);

b) ensure that *all* teachers in the school have collective responsibility for *all* students;

c) develop tracking boards to monitor student progress throughout the year (keep in a prominent location so that staff is constantly reminded of it); and

d) use diagnostic and assessment tools such as PM Benchmark and DRA assessments effectively for in-school and district determination of next steps to identify not only the needs of each student but also system-wide professional development needs.

7) Literacy Professional Development at School Staff Meetings

Principals made a commitment to focus on PD at staff meetings rather than on operational items (reduced to memo format). They focus on weaving together assessment literacy and instructional intelligence as experienced in classrooms through the literacy lens. This in-school PD is based on the school's own data, brought to meetings by the teachers who work on the data together.

8) In-School Grade Meetings

At weekly meetings staff focus on the literacy achievement of individual students by using common assessment tools or exemplars so that same-grade teachers can come to a common understanding of the expected standards across a grade level.

9) Book Rooms of Levelled Books

Principals and their literacy teams have created book rooms for the primary and junior levels. Literacy teachers have levelled books for classroom teachers' use in order to bring all students – from those in Kindergarten to those in Grade 6 – to the next reading level..

10) Allocation of School Budget for Literacy Resources

Administrators and their literacy leadership teams have agreed to budget for book study resources recommended by curriculum consultants for use by both students and teachers.

11) Action Research Focused on Literacy

School literacy teams posed questions concerning literacy and increased student achievement that related to their school data. They explored answers together throughout the year. District staff provided four PD sessions during the year for action research teams and a $1000 per-school grant for on-site work. As school teams had to write a report at year-end that documented their journey, they were highly accountable. These reports were compiled into a board report for use by other schools.

12) Parental Involvement

School literacy teams worked towards establishing community-home-school relationships. Many teams reached out to establish pre-school literacy programs in the community, with teachers going out to community centres as part of school readiness programs.

13) **Cross-Curricular Literacy Connections**

Although the Literacy Collaborative began with a focus on the primary years, *all* teachers, JK–8, began to discuss and then implement teaching literacy in the content areas across the grades.

14) **Preparation of an Annual School Report**

All schools in the LC prepare an annual report that summarizes the evidence of improved literacy achievement by:

a) using data to drive instruction;

b) building administrator and teacher capacity to teach balanced literacy to all students; and

c) establishing a professional learning community.

Lessons for District-Wide Strategies – Key Learnings

The following key lessons include suggestions for learning at all three levels of implementation: school, board, and province.

- At the provincial level, there needs to be a team of people who understand education working in partnership with all directors. "We need to stop competing and we need to be willing to share with each other."

- External partners are crucial – for example, "critical friends" who conduct assessments of where the school board is, identify key components that "make something work and make it successful", and make recommendations to implement changes.

- The director needs to have a clear vision, focusing on one priority, such as literacy, which mobilizes the whole system to implement changes and to stay the course.

- Everyone in the organization needs to understand the focus and needs to be on board – no one should be left out.

- Everyone in the organization needs to understand the importance of data-driven decision making.

- Assessment-based instructional strategies and practices need to be the focus for improvement in student learning.

- Sustained professional development involving school teams is necessary in order to have distributed leadership; principals must be involved in the team.

- Funding needs to be in place to allow planning for more than six months to a year.

- Sustained support – financial, material, and human – is key.

- There needs to be compelling moral messaging about the initiative.

- A common language needs to be spoken by all.

- Building capacity has to take place at all levels.

- It is imperative to have curriculum coordinators develop the plan and implement the system vision, and embed a balanced literacy approach in every content session with school teams.

- Literacy is THE focus.

Case Study Report

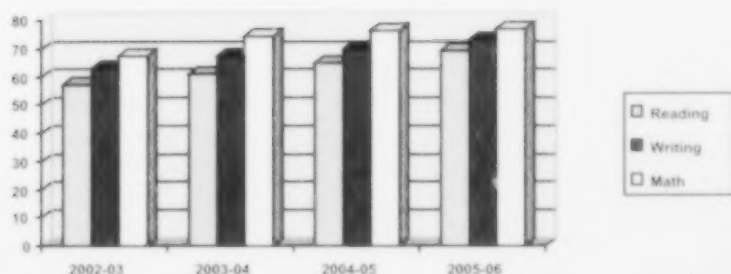## 1. Board Context and Performance

The York Region District School Board (YRDSB) is a growing school board, opening, on average, five elementary schools a year for the last five years, and one secondary school every other year. There are currently 140 elementary schools and 28 secondary schools in the board, with over 108,000 students and 8,000 teachers (Sharratt & Fullan, 2005).

The district's population has grown and changed over the last 15 years so that it is now very diverse culturally, especially in the south end of the district. Although York Region has one of the highest median household incomes in the GTA, the number of low-income households doubled between 1996 and 2001.

As indicated in the tables and charts below, the YRDSB's provincial assessment results have improved over time in all subject areas at both Grades 3 and 6.

GRADE 3: PERCENTAGE OF YRDSB STUDENTS AT LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

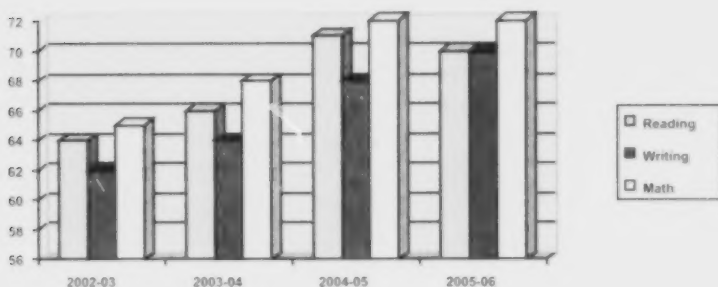| Grade 3	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	Change 02/03–05/06
Reading	57	61	65	69	12
Writing	63	67	70	73	10
Math	67	74	76	77	10

GRADE 6: PERCENTAGE OF YRDSB STUDENTS AT LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

Grade 6	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	Change 02/03–05/06
Reading	64	66	71	70	6
Writing	62	64	68	70	8
Math	65	68	72	72	7

2. Data Collection

Three members of the senior administration team were interviewed face to face: Bill Hogarth, Director of Education; Lyn Sharratt, Superintendent of Curriculum; and Cathy Costello, Regional Coordinator Literacy.

A total of 12 elementary school principals were interviewed by phone. All four geographic areas were represented: East, West, Central, and North.

Data collection also included a review of the *Welcome to the Literacy Learning Fair* document compiled by the Curriculum and Instructional Services Department of the school board; other documentary evidence; EQAO data; and observations of the Literacy Collaborative, a district-wide initiative focused on enhancing literacy for all students through the support of all schools and teachers.

3. Board's Approach to Support Improvement

The YRDSB's mission reads:

> *We unite in our purpose to inspire and prepare learners for life in our changing world community.*

The director of education emphasizes the importance of articulating a clear, shared vision from which a culture of improvement develops and an infrastructure of support is put in place. This was not always the case, according to the director, who said:

> *When I arrived in York Region, there were some wonderful one-off literacy initiatives ... [But] lack of clarity about system direction ... [there was a] need for a framework.*

The vision and focus that has developed revolves around:

- Literacy is the priority

- Equity of opportunity – All children can learn; classroom teachers teach *all* children.

The YRDSB's focus on literacy started over 10 years ago when, at the start of his directorship in York Region, the director of education asked:

1. How many students can read in Kindergarten?

2. How many students can read at the start of Grade 1?

3. How many students can read by the end of Grade 1?

4. How many students cannot read by the end of Grade 2?

The fact that no one could immediately answer these questions resulted in significant change in practice. The director believes that from these questions flowed the system-wide strategy and focus on literacy: "A structure has to be framed so you have everybody looking in the same direction. The journey starts with the questions."

The director made an impact statement: "Every child will read by the end of Grade 1." Then he proposed that "we have a moral imperative to teach all children, including those who are lowest achieving in Grade 1, and not excluding any child for any reason." From that point on, the board continued to pose questions and to implement new strategies. Subsequent questions, for example, have been "What do we mean by 'reading'?" "Where are we and where do we need to go from here?" The journey into a system-wide literacy focus had started, with a shared understanding that "assessment drives instruction, and drives literacy".

From these questions, a board-wide approach and common understanding of the importance of having that common understanding developed. To this end, the district began a number of strategic pilot projects in literacy; they asked a group of external resource/university partners (led by Michael Fullan and Carol Rolheiser) to conduct an external research study focused on their pilot work. The report (Mascall, Fullan, & Rolheiser, 2001) had one major commendation and one major criticism: the YRDSB's work in literacy involved a number of very solid initiatives, but the work was fragmented. The report recommended an overarching literacy strategy that would link the various initiatives and provide more coherence to the board's work. The Literacy Collaborative grew out of that recommendation and was intended to bring all of the board's work together in a more coherent and connected way.

Key features of the board-wide approach included increasing student achievement by:

- clearly articulating the vision and commitment to a system-wide literacy priority for *all* students, and continually communicating them to everyone in the system;

- developing a system-wide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement;

- using data to drive instruction and determine resources;

- building administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy to *all* students; and

- establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

According to the board's plan (York Region District School Board, 2002), York Region's work builds on three models for improving students' literacy achievement:

1. **Four Dimensions that Increase Student Achievement:**

   - district commitment;
   - strategic leadership;
   - assessment that drives instruction; and
   - parental and community involvement.

2. **Leadership for Increased Student Achievement:**

   Quality instruction and assessment through:

   - enhancing cultures of learning;
   - knowledge building and sharing;
   - managing change; and
   - planning for coherence.

3. **Implementation Wheel** (Hill & Crevola, 1999):

   The implementation wheel has been used as an organizer for all literacy activities in York Region (see Appendix A).

   The director, with the support of his senior team and the board, and external experts, including Michael Fullan, Carol Rolheiser, and Carmel Crévola, ensured that everyone understood that they would focus on one target: literacy. This is what the director felt was going to make the difference for the schools. In order to accomplish that objective, senior management would have to take ownership of this literacy focus.

   The goal of having everyone attain a common understanding of the literacy focus precipitated a comprehensive systematized board plan for continuous improvement and the development of a framework for the implementation of literacy from that plan. The plan (York Region District School Board, 2002) provides a system plan that defines the human, material, and development resources available to support:

   - literacy;
   - assessment for learning;
   - instructional intelligence;

- information technology/e-learning;
- student success;
- community-based education; and
- special education.

York Region's commitment to literacy as a moral imperative is articulated in its plan (York Region District School Board, 2002), which states:

Literacy is the right of all students and a responsibility of all educators and communities. It allows democracy to thrive, equity to be established, and freedom to be embraced.

Literacy is broadly defined by the superintendent of curriculum as "the focus in our classrooms and in our learning environment, both at school and at the regional level, and in our work with communities and parents". This was overwhelmingly confirmed by the principals interviewed. One elementary school principal summed up the senior administration's approach when he stated that the school board "has created a system-wide playing field". Other principals' comments include:

- "The approach is proactive and all encompassing."
- "The board's priority is student achievement and literacy."
- "The board's approach includes a plan for continuous improvement, which provides a framework for school plans for continuous improvement."
- "Data collection – how? and why?; a lot of energy has gone into this; what is important data?"
- "Data was going to be the driving force – where are we and where do we need to go."
- "The approach is a school-based and system-driven commitment."
- "The board moved from broad scope to more focus on literacy and in that learning process as many people as possible were included: trustees, business planners, teachers."
- "[The approach consists of] the alignment of many people working together to understand board and school improvement."
- "It's a very clear approach, focused, [with] clear directions, progressive."
- "The focus on literacy has been outstanding."

4. Strategies and Actions in Place to Support Improvement

There were three areas that we focused on ... areas, where we encouraged discussion and celebrated the fact that we were going to focus on literacy, through quality classroom instruction, effective schools, and community involvement. (Director of Education)

One of the key strategies put in place by the school board to support system-wide improvements is the Literacy Collaborative. In 2001–02, 17 of the most challenging schools began work in the Literacy Collaborative; in 2005, all 168 schools were involved. The goal was to engage all schools in the district, including secondary schools. A key feature of the Literacy Collaborative has been the attendance of the school leadership teams, consisting of the principal, literacy teacher, and special education resource teacher (SERT), from all schools at the Literacy Collaborative sessions. As well, the district has focused on capacity building, assessment and data literacy, instructional leadership, specific literacy initiatives, and links with external partners. The senior leaders interviewed identified four prongs to the Literacy Collaborative strategy: change management, content knowledge, leadership development, and intensive support.

The Literacy Collaborative is focused on improved literacy learning for all students and is described by the board as "a learning structure that embraces long-term professional development designed to provide a comprehensive, school-wide approach to literacy and mathematical instruction. The goals are: to increase students' literacy achievement by using assessment for instruction and program improvement purposes; building teacher and administrator capacity in literacy instruction; and establishing sustainable, collaborative professional learning communities within and among schools across the district. To that end, schools commit to the parameters of the Literacy Collaborative" (Sharratt & Fullan, 2005).

Components of this collaborative learning program "are related to literacy data management using a case study approach, sharing and coaching successful practices in assessment and instruction, using change management strategies to facilitate students' literacy improvement and building school-based leadership". Besides the specific literacy-related content knowledge that is required to implement a balanced literacy approach, there is also knowledge related to change management and leadership.

The latter focus includes ideas related to the following: community building, the creation of professional learning communities, tools for understanding and managing change, sustaining momentum, dealing with resistance, building and sharing knowledge through quality professional development, coaching for success, strategies for quality instruction and assessment, embedding tools for reflection, and planning for program coherence.

Members of the Literacy Collaborative leadership team include: the principal, one or more literacy teachers, and a SERT. The program is designed by curriculum coordinators and consultants to help the team "develop skill sets to facilitate change, to develop clarity and flexibility in understanding and responding to teachers' needs, and to develop expertise in students' literacy and mathematical needs". Team members also "learn content about balanced literacy/assessment/instruction and network in divisional cohorts supported by curriculum teams. Teams attend Fullan and Rolheiser seminars in elementary/secondary cluster groups".

Everyone who was interviewed suggested that this strategy is the centrepiece of the school board's system-wide approach to literacy improvement.

System Focus and Capacity Building for Literacy

The school board recognized that a system-wide plan for professional development was required. The target was to have everybody understand that literacy was the focus and this was what was going to make a difference. (Director of Education)

How do you retrain teachers? Not train; re-train. We had a tremendous gap because students come out of the faculty not understanding literacy components; they don't have a ... "deep, structured understanding of literacy acquisition", and I really felt that if we were going to make any mark at all, that was the way to do it. So I established in my own mind a five-year target to say, "Here is how we can incorporate Reading Recovery ™ into all of our schools, and I underscore, all of our schools" ... but at the same time, we do the right teacher retraining on literacy acquisition with the expectation that they would work with the rest of the teachers on the staff. (Director of Education)

The Literacy Collaborative was established as a means of developing shared instructional leadership in literacy.

I wanted to build in the leadership capacity and I wanted to build in a deep-rooted understanding of literacy through the Literacy Collaborative. (Director of Education)

Schools were asked to volunteer to participate in the Literacy Collaborative. In the first year, 17 of the lowest-performing schools participated. By starting with enthusiastic participants, momentum and success followed and this encouraged other schools to become involved. In the following year, 40 schools participated, then 105 schools, and now all 168 schools in the system are involved. Schools are held accountable for their participation as they have to sign a commitment to the parameters listed below, including to using data in a case management approach to inform practices and monitor progress.

According to Sharratt and Fullan (2005) and the board's *Curriculum and Instructional Services Plan for Continuous Improvement* (2002–08), the literacy collaborative model has the following very specific components and expectations:

1. **Shared Beliefs and Understandings**

   Leaders in LC schools must not only share certain beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning, but they must also "walk the talk" by taking action to demonstrate that they believe:

   a) *All* students can meet high standards given the right time and support.

   b) *All* teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance.

   c) High expectations and early intervention are essential.

   d) Teachers need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do (Hill & Crevola, 1999).

2. **Embedded Literacy Teachers**

   This role was initially shared by a half-time Reading Recovery™ teacher and a half-time literacy teacher – allocated from within school staffing; now *all* elementary and secondary schools are provided with a literacy teacher so that all schools can be part of the LC. No one can say, "It's impossible to find the staffing."

The literacy teacher works alongside classroom teachers modelling/demonstrating successful literacy practice – it is *not* a matter of withdrawing students who need help from the classroom learning environment.

In the selection of literacy teachers, the following characteristics are key:

a) strong interpersonal/facilitation skills (required for classroom coaching);

b) strong assessment and instructional knowledge in balanced literacy; and

c) ongoing commitment to being a lead literacy learner.

3. Timetabled Literacy Block

The literacy block, at least 100 uninterrupted minutes per day, should be scheduled in the morning to emphasize:

a) focused time on task on balanced literacy assessment and instruction;

b) no distractions or interruptions such as announcements, field trips, or assemblies during this dedicated literacy time; and

c) alignment of the literacy teacher's daily timetable with the literacy block.

4. Full Implementation of Reading Recovery™

This program supports literacy by identifying the lowest-achieving children in every Grade 1 class and moving these children to read and write at the average level so that they are able to benefit from good classroom instruction.

Principals must:

a) select competent and experienced primary teachers to be trained in Reading Recovery™;

b) ensure that *daily* lessons support the lowest-achieving individual students; and

c) commit to providing access to daily Reading Recovery™ instruction for all children who need it.

5. Principal Leadership

The principal's deep structural understanding of successful literacy practices in classrooms is key. Therefore, principals in the LC must be committed to:

a) attending *all* regional literacy professional development sessions with their literacy leadership team;

b) focusing on school data to improve student achievement; and

c) staying the course/maintaining the literacy plan, outlined in the school plan, until improvement is achieved.

6. Case Management Approach

In order to use data to drive instruction and select resources, the LC model recommends the use of a case management approach to:

a) put an individual face on the data so that teachers know which students need more support (e.g., daily guided reading in the classroom, booster group support, reading buddies);

b) ensure that *all* teachers in the school have collective responsibility for *all* students;

c) develop tracking boards to monitor student progress throughout the year (kept in a prominent location so that staff is constantly reminded of it); and

d) use diagnostic and assessment tools such as PM Benchmark and DRA assessments effectively for in-school and district determination of next steps not only to identify each student's needs but also system-wide professional development needs.

7. Literacy Professional Development at School Staff Meetings

Principals made a commitment to focusing on PD at staff meetings rather than on operational items (reduced to memo format). They focus on weaving together assessment literacy and instructional intelligence as experienced in classrooms through the literacy lens. This in-school PD is based on the school's own data, brought to meetings by the teachers who work on the data together.

8. In-School Grade Meetings

At weekly meetings staff focus on the literacy achievement of individual students by using common assessment tools or exemplars so that same-grade teachers can come to common understanding of the expected standards across a grade level.

9. Book Rooms of Levelled Books

Principals and their literacy teams have created book rooms for the primary and junior levels. Literacy teachers have levelled books for classroom teachers' use in order to bring all students – from those in Kindergarten to those in Grade 6 – to the next reading level.

10. Allocation of School Budget for Literacy Resources

Administrators and their literacy leadership teams have agreed to budget for book study resources recommended by curriculum consultants for use by both students and teachers.

11. Action Research Focused on Literacy

School literacy teams posed questions concerning literacy and increased student achievement that related to their school data. They explored answers together throughout the year. District staff provided four PD sessions during the year for action research teams and a per-school $1000 grant for on-site work. As school teams had to write a report at year-end that documented their journey, they were highly accountable. These reports were compiled into a board report for use by other schools.

12. Parental Involvement

School literacy teams worked towards establishing community-home-school relationships. Many teams reached out to establish pre-school literacy programs in the community, with teachers going out to community centres as part of school readiness programs.

13. Cross-Curricular Literacy Connections

Although the Literacy Collaborative began with a focus on the primary years, *all* JK–8 teachers began to discuss and then implement teaching literacy in the content areas across the grades.

14. Preparation of an Annual School Report

All schools in the LC prepare an annual report that summarizes the evidence of improved literacy achievement by:

a) using data to drive instruction;

b) building administrator and teacher capacity to teach balanced literacy to all students; and

c) establishing a professional learning community.

The principals interviewed commented favourably on the Literacy Collaborative and the range of professional development supports and resources available. Comments from principals point to a culture of improvement in literacy – for example, "We are supporting literacy and learning in the classroom by developing a common language around understanding what literacy looks like" and "Support is provided through direction, resources, and structures."

Numeracy Initiatives

While the main focus in York Region is on literacy, the superintendent of curriculum argues that the board's approach encourages the development of "multi-literacies that are inclusive of all subject areas". The approach has been one of "weaving together assessment literacy and instructional intelligence in all subject areas through the literacy lens". It is intended that the district will weave numeracy more explicitly into literacy this year.

Equity of Outcome

York Region combines a focus on high levels of literacy achievement with a commitment to learning and achievement for every student to support equity of opportunity. Its approach is one of both raising the bar and closing the gap in student achievement. Professional development activities, for example, include sessions to build teacher capacity in ESL/ELD and to work with at-risk students linked to the Student Success initiative.

Use of Data

One of the key messages communicated to staff by senior staff is the importance of data-driven decision making. For example, as the director of education commented, "Assessment drives instruction, drives literacy and we wrap it around technology. We started with assessment and we were building an understanding of assessment and evaluation." The district supports schools in the use and analysis of a range of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment approaches, including PM Benchmarks, DRA, running records, and EQAO scores.

The YRDSB has a research and evaluation services department that gathers, stores, and analyses a variety of sources of student, school, and community data.

Researchers look at EQAO data, socioeconomic status factors, and individual school scores to guide their decision making in supporting student achievement, school performance, and professional practice.

The two superintendents interviewed indicated that through the Literacy Collaborative commitments, intensive support for 35 schools was provided by curriculum coordinators and consultants. Through confirmation of data from the schools, the senior leadership team was able to see how "savvy principals were about their data". Through this diagnostic protocol, the senior leadership team then worked with principals to determine the area of focus they needed help with from curriculum consultants. From that, an action plan was created for the school team. Senior staff emphasized the importance of knowing the school's capacity for understanding data:

> *We wanted to know whether principals understood the data and whether they knew how to interpret it. Some of them were extraordinarily comfortable and had binders full of data, all beautifully summarized, and had interpreted it, and others were still kind of at the "gathering in, don't quite know where it is at". That gave us a window into some of their needs. (Literacy Coordinator)*

Through data, decisions about the allocation of consultants and other resources could be based on evidence. As the superintendent of curriculum said, "What is key now is the selection of the consultants that match the needs of each of the schools." School principals reported that they recognised the importance of data within the district and the support provided for schools in the use of data.

Allocation of Resources

The director realized early on that in order to allocate financial, material, and human resources to implement the board plan to improve student literacy achievement, they had "to have the right senior team with people who were receptive and willing to acknowledge that if you're going to make a difference in the quality of learning, you have to build that into the budget". He explained that "budget drives your program; therefore, your program drives student achievement". The director emphasized the need to align budget decisions with a clear vision for literacy, and secured the support of the board in prioritizing resource allocation to building literacy capacity. This started ten years ago when the board allocated $1 million to support professional development. Starting in 1994–95, adjustments to the budget to support the priority focus on literacy have been made each year.

It was also important to the director to have the business supervisory officer understand that the board had to redistribute funding in order to support the literacy program, including its implementation, and to allow teachers time to deliver it. Innovation funds were also used to support action research projects. The YRDSB reallocated some of the funds received from the Local Opportunities Grant (LOG) to embed literacy coaches in all schools.

Links with External Partners

The YRDSB has made extensive use of external experts as "critical friends" to support improvement. External partners who served as content specialists and helped frame the instructional component of the literacy implementation were: Carmel Crévola, Peter Hill, and Barrie Bennett (an instructional intelligence expert). Furthermore, in order to build well-trained cadres of instructional experts among teachers, principals, and superintendents, the senior leadership team recognized that they would have to get "get staff on board ... do something that was pretty defined and definitive, and that is where we rolled into an understanding of implementation, an understanding that if you are going to implement and implement well, you have to deal with change and change management. That is where Carol Rolheiser and Michael Fullan became important to the whole process." The YRDSB is also firmly committed to building links with external research partners, community members, and parents as partners for student achievement and system improvement. These links capitalize on carrying out the types of research-based decision making inspired by Fullan, Rolheiser, and Leithwood, among others.

External links are a central element of York Region's vision. For example, as outlined above, the Literacy Collaborative includes approaches to include parents and families in literacy initiatives. The Performance-Plus program, for example, is designed to create meaningful and supportive connections among schools, parents, community members, and other relevant local agencies. One aim of the program is to "try to reduce a sense of isolation and alienation" through initiatives that:

- link the school to the community and the community to the school;
- connect children with other adults – counsellors, teachers, mentors, youth workers, and health care professionals – to "fold children into a web of support";
- offer a safe environment before and after school with extended programs; and
- provide programs to reach parents.

By working with other relevant agencies, particularly health care agencies, the Performance-Plus program aims also to support students' physical and emotional health, which in turn can benefit their readiness to learn and their engagement at school. This strand of the program involves schools working in collaboration with health care agencies to try to provide:

- health services

- counselling, drug prevention programs, personal hygiene programs, dental clinics

- a secure environment

- information for parents on various health issues

- programs for building self-esteem

- nutrition programs

5. Board's Operation to Support Improvement

The director of education recognized that the strategy required to implement the literacy focus in the board would have to include "the right person in the right place". This would be a head of curriculum who was recognized as an instructional leader. It would also require a senior leadership team and board of trustees whose members were receptive to the plan. Board staff were all required to become literacy consultants. This included bringing the business superintendent on board so that he could understand why and how funding should be reallocated for literacy programs. The intent, and the starting point, was to gather together the board's literacy expertise.

> *We involved everyone in delivering content sessions, no matter what their subject specialist background. They have [all] had an involvement. Sometimes that has been the most powerful professional development, I think, especially at the intermediate and secondary level, where you have a history consultant or a geography consultant coming in and saying, "This is the way to approach literacy in your subject area."* (Superintendent of Curriculum)

In order to get "the right people on the right bus, going in the right direction", there was a restructuring of the senior leadership team. When the director started his tenure, there were 26 superintendents; there are now 18. Community Education Centres were created and two superintendents were appointed per centre. As the

YRDSB is a large school board, with close to 170 schools, elementary schools were divided into four areas, and secondary schools were considered a fifth area within the board. With this kind of restructuring, the Community Education Centres within each of the five jurisdictions provided a direct link for each school to a specified superintendent and to other area services, for example, a special education specialist/consultant could provide direct support and services to the schools within that area. The administrators of each area meet at their Community Education Centre once a month with their superintendents to share and discuss common concerns and information. In the interim, each school administrator has direct access to the superintendent assigned to his or her area.

The Community Education Centres have been a way of providing a type of satellite service in which superintendents of education are not all located in the central district office. Instead, they are in the area offices/community education centres, all of which are in schools or former schools that have been converted to special services facilities and area offices. They provide service and support to the schools within their area.

Parents also have more direct access. If they wish, they can contact the superintendent associated with the school their children attend. Office and meeting spaces are provided in the Community Education Centres, and some special programs, for example, Reading Recovery™ training, also take place in these spaces,.

The director worked to ensure that a strong positive relationship was cultivated with the board of trustees: "It doesn't happen unless you have people sitting in that boat with you … Trustees are in the boat with us." The relationship between staff and the board of trustees was cultivated through the creation of committees and subcommittees such as the Program Planning Committee, the Literacy Council, the Property Management Committee, and the Assessment and Evaluation Committee. The latter (which includes trustees) provided input on such decisions as how many report cards should be sent to parents per year. These committees were established in order to bring all senior staff and trustees on board to consider what YRDSB schools should look like and how the schools would support the literacy programs.

What we have done is structure the board beyond the boardroom to look at and value the direction that we want to move in, and involve them [the trustees] as part of the process, without fighting about the issues. In order to come on board, you have to understand what this is

all about. At first, they wanted to micromanage, but once they under-
stood that they had to work side by side, it changed their whole outlook
on their role. (Director of Education)

6. Role of Board Staff

School board staff interviewed for this case study defined their role as "literacy
leaders".

Role of the Director

The director's role was to articulate clearly the board's vision for literacy and foster
collective commitment to that vision, and to provide direction and support for its
implementation. In other words, to clarify both the *what* and the *how* for the system:

I don't think that it's enough to say, "Here's the vision." It's an over-
used, hackneyed word. I think you have to say, "Here's what we are
doing," followed by, "Here's how we are going to do it." You have to
listen to where the system is, and understand how you support the
implementation of a plan according to where the system is. A lot of it
is reading, some of it is experience, and some of it is intuitive, but I
would suggest that listening to the rhythm of the system becomes an
absolutely critical piece. (Director of Education)

The role involves providing both an infrastructure (structure, resources, support)
for system improvement and supporting a culture focused on a coherent vision for
improvement.

It's the interweaving of different things: some of it is done by the
structure that you set up inside the board, the committees and
subcommittees set up with trustees involved, and some of it is done
through your own articulation of what you want to have happen.
(Director of Education)

The work also requires fostering a collective commitment to improvement with
literacy as the focus. This requires a role for the director in understanding, and
building bridges between, the roles of all involved.

The other thing is you have to know how to straddle the reality of the
role of the trustees, the role of the senior staff, and how you engage
them to allow the engagement of teachers. (Director of Education)

The district's approach to ensure the development of the knowledge and skills required for student literacy achievement includes instructional leadership from the director to ensure that the school board has built "the capacity of teachers to actually deliver in the classroom". Instructional leadership begins with the director in this district. Through being present in schools and engaged in instructional discussions, a collective system focus on ensuring literacy improvement is generated. As Bill Hogarth explains:

> *I wanted to build in the leadership capacity and I wanted to build in a deep-rooted understanding of literacy through the Literacy Collaborative. I visited schools, first on Tuesdays and now it is Thursdays. I noticed, at the same time, that the level of instruction is varied throughout the school board. In 2002, I went to see the newly appointed Curriculum and Instruction Superintendent, Lyn Sharratt, and said, "I've got some problems with the instruction issue; I just don't see our young people coming out of the faculties with instructional intelligence." Barrie Bennett became our "critical friend" and was able to fill the gap and deal with the whole issue of instruction and instructional intelligence.*

Role of the Supervisory Officers and the Curriculum Department

The supervisory officers see themselves as "facilitators" and "keepers of the vision". The superintendent of curriculum, who plays a critical role, models being a literacy instructional leader. The superintendent of curriculum explained:

> [The expectation was] *that all of us would be literacy leaders in the curriculum department. We had to reframe our area of expertise through personal/professional development. We divided ourselves into reading groups and worked collaboratively to build workshops on literacy and mathematics and so on. We have drawn on our strengths, while reframing our vision.*

Role of the Literacy Teams

The literacy teams (principal, lead literacy teacher, and special education teacher) are also critical in terms of change management and the implementation of the literacy strategy.

Role of the Principal

Principals interviewed saw themselves as leaders who could clearly articulate the goals of the school plan and support literacy and learning in the classroom by: helping to develop a common language around understanding what literacy looks like; promoting cross-curricular approaches to literacy; providing support through direction, resources, and structures; creating a culture of collaboration; encouraging the formation of learning teams; being models for professional development; and advocating that everyone in the board be a learner.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers receive specific training in literacy content sessions from curriculum coordinators and consultants to ensure that they are building their capacity to deliver quality instruction in the classroom. There has been a considerable amount of district support in identifying quality instructional practices from the literature and from critical friends and then providing quality professional development focused on instruction through the Instructional Intelligence initiative and the Literacy Collaborative. The board has also supported publishing the work of action research emerging from teacher inquiry. The role of the teacher in this district has been expanded so that leadership can occur on many fronts. In fact, the distributed leadership model puts the teacher in a role central to the work of the Literacy Collaborative.

In order to sustain focus on instruction in times of change in student population, staff, and leadership, the role of the teacher is seen as one that includes the continuous redefining of one's practice regarding the needs of one's students and mentoring new teachers to learn "what long-serving teachers take for granted" (York Region District School Board, 2005, pp. 38–39). The role of the teacher also includes building leadership capacity, whereby "teachers build a commitment to shared leadership as they discuss, strategize, and develop common understanding about literacy change ... teachers are encouraged to explore informal leadership at the school and to take on the planning of school events such as a study group or a day of shared professional practice" (pp.39–40).

7. Connections between School and School Board

Generally speaking, the relationship between the district and schools has been characterized by staff as being one of pressure and support. The pressure is not conveyed in an authoritarian way, but, rather, is seen as a collegial partnership.

The principals interviewed recognized the level of support provided by the school board for literacy improvement, for example, through the Literacy Collaborative and the allocation of sufficient Reading Recovery™ teachers to provide support to around 20 per cent of students in Grade 1. Principals consistently and overwhelmingly expressed how well the district supported them in the implementation of the literacy plan. Nevertheless, principals also recognized that they were being held accountable for ensuring the capacity of their staff to deliver improved instructional strategies and student achievement. For example:

> *The accountability comes through the Literacy Learning Fair (a feature of the Literacy Collaborative). The expectation is that schools will be able to report on three outcomes at the fair – there is a commitment and they sign a commitment form and they know that inherent in that is to do the research all year long – they report on their students' improvement in the areas of: content, change management and leadership development.*

Both support and accountability focused on literacy improvement are evident.

A close working relationship between schools and district staff is fostered. For example, senior leaders are present and visible within the system and through visits to schools. The director makes a point of visiting schools every week. Superintendents meet with the principals several times a year to go over their school improvement plans that are focused on literacy, and principals meet as part of the literacy team every month.

As indicated above, there is a strong emphasis on creating a coherent common message and understanding around the literacy focus. As the superintendent of curriculum commented, there is a "need to be coherent in messaging across [the] system. Previously, [there were] lots of initiatives, but not all hooked together." The district's vision and direction are clearly articulated through the Literacy Collaborative graphic, which outlines all of the board's key messages: commitment to system literacy priority, parameters, outcomes, site-based decision making, and questions they are still asking (see Appendix B).

Everyone interviewed, from the director to the principals, was able to clearly articulate the vision and focus of the board. As district documentation noted, "The district has spent about a decade creating a vision for literacy as the central building block for

education in the YRDSB" (York Region District School Board, 2005, pp. 38–39). The significance of creating a clear vision is also related to the building of a shared vision that is owned not only by school leaders but also by teachers and the entire school community, including trustees, the school council, and community members. The challenge is keeping a steady vision in the midst of external changes (including changes in staff).

8. Lateral Capacity Building

From the onset, this school board was intent on building lateral capacity – at the system, school, and classroom levels.

Strategies used by the school board for lateral capacity building include:

- Each year, the Literacy Collaborative culminates with an end-of-year activity called the Literacy Fair. At the fair, all schools present the work they have done throughout the year and share with schools from across the board. Invited external guests, from organizations such as the ministry, universities, federations, and professional organizations, also join in

- The Administrator Academies, run by Barrie Bennett, provide training to administrators, superintendents, and consultants on teacher conferencing.

- The YRDSB is currently moving into regional capacity building with the other district school boards in the Barrie Region, Ontario.

9. Evaluation of Effectiveness

According to the director, there is evidence of three areas of success in the board. They have had a changing demographic over the last 15 years, yet student success has not only continued but improved. It is interesting to note that the school board had 120 ESL teachers before the new funding model, but, as a result of the new funding model, they now have 60. The senior leadership team did not allow this reduction in human resources to be a distractor. The director attributes the success that the board has had to their clear literacy plan.

To determine, overall, how successful or effective their strategy has been, the curriculum department conducts surveys and produces an annual board report which

indicates that, notwithstanding the population growth and changing socioeconomic demographics, EQAO scores have not declined overall.

> *So, I think, to sustain our results through growth and change is a very significant measure of our focus and our success. I think that is a measure of consistency, focus, and getting the job done.*
> (Literacy Coordinator)

Improvement is also reflected in provincial assessments with higher scores being achieved by students in reading, writing, and mathematics at both Grades 3 and 6. Alongside this overall trend at the board level, Sharratt and Fullan's (2005) analysis of the improvement of schools within different cohorts of the Literacy Collaborative's development offers further illumination. Schools that have been involved in the Literacy Collaborative for a longer period of time and have also paid attention to ensuring each component of the Literacy Collaborative is implemented rigorously appear to have improved their performance more significantly. This suggests the need to focus on the details of implementing a quality literacy plan.

Strategies designed for early intervention to support students' learning, particularly through support for reading in Grade 1, appear also to be demonstrating effectiveness in supporting improved student outcomes. In terms of the pivotal question posed by the director at the start of the YRDSB's literacy journey – "How many students can read by the end of Grade 1?" – PM Benchmark data reported in June 2004 indicated that almost 82 per cent of students in Grade 1 were reading at or above the standard – an improvement of 30 per cent since he asked the question!

Another area of success is seen in the secondary schools:

> *You can walk into secondary schools now and you can [see] them understanding that literacy is important, and it is literacy across the school.* (Director of Education)

The third area of success is the fact that staff across the board are engaged in action research projects. Part of the $55,000 innovative fund goes into action research and the expectation is that project leads substantiate any claims they make with data.

All principals interviewed confirmed that the board's literacy strategy has been effective and successful, and attribute part of the success to the fact that there has indeed been a

strong scaffolding of four components with a literacy focus: a foundational framework, guidelines for instruction, assessment and evaluation, and technological support. Success is also attributed to the ongoing support and dialogue facilitated by senior administration.

A recent survey of all school teams (principals, literacy teachers, and special education resource teachers) in all schools in the board, for which the response rate was 76 per cent, indicates very positive feedback about the Literacy Collaborative strategy. The percentages that follow reflect the responses of those who reported that the strategy had an effect ranging from "somewhat of an impact to a great impact" with respect to the questions asked about the Literacy Collaborative's impact:

The Literacy Collaborative has:

1) provided teachers with a wider range of teaching strategies (89.5%);

2) helped teachers and administrators ensure that adequate resources are available to support students' learning (78.3%);

3) raised the expertise of the teachers within their schools (87.7%);

4) increased the school-wide focus on literacy (94.6%);

5) clarified the role of all teachers in support of literacy instruction (78.2%);

6) provided more attention and assistance to students at risk (82.9%);

7) helped identify students at risk earlier (79%);

8) helped the school raise literacy expectations for all students (90%);

9) produced more consistency and continuity in literacy instruction across different subject areas (74.5%);

10) ensured that the school is organized around the learning needs of students (80.1%);

11) fostered a more positive attitude among staff regarding the teaching of literacy (85%); and

12) involved individual teachers in sharing expertise and effective practices with teachers from other schools (68.7%).

10. Challenges Encountered

In order to be inclusive in terms of change management and capacity building, the director said that in his opinion one should help people understand that they are part of the process and help them understand how they fit in. While all schools are involved in the Literacy Collaborative, some schools were initially more enthusiastic than others (e.g., those who had to be "persuaded" of the importance of this initiative). The other challenging factor is time. In order to implement change, one needs time to integrate the information and knowledge being presented.

11. Sustainability of Improvement

Senior board staff wanted to build in the leadership capacity and a deep-rooted understanding of literacy through the Literacy Collaborative.

The consensus among everyone interviewed is that sustainability of improvement requires the following:

- time
- intensive work all of the time
- shared leadership
- succession planning
- all curriculum and resource supports need to be put in place
- stability
- shared understanding and shared vision

12. Future Developments

Senior board staff identified the following areas for the board's future developments:

- Target every Kindergarten child to read or have a level-5 Reading Recovery™ understanding.
- Target every Grade 1 child to reach level-16 Reading Recovery™, which includes comprehension.
- Teach the language of mathematics.

- Target administrators (principals and vice-principals) for enhancement of their knowledge of assessment literacy and instructional intelligence.

- Build system leaders' capacity as literacy leaders, for example: "We are going to give our administrators, superintendents and consultants the opportunity to engage in walk-through training, as we are crafting it for York Region, so it is focused on literacy walks" (Superintendent of Curriculum).

In the York Region's System Plan for Continuous Improvement and the *Curriculum and Instructional Services Plan for Continuous Improvement (2002–08)*, priority actions for each year are detailed.

13. Lessons for District-Wide Strategies – Key Learnings

The following key lessons include suggestions for learning at all three levels of implementation: school, board, and province.

- At the provincial level, there needs to be a team of people who understand education working in partnership with all directors. "We need to stop competing and we need to be willing to share with each other."

- External partners are crucial – for example, "critical friends" who conduct assessments of where the school board is, identify key components that "make something work and make it successful", and make recommendations to implement changes.

- The director needs to have a clear vision, focusing on one priority, such as literacy, which mobilizes the whole system to implement changes and to stay the course.

- Everyone in the organization needs to understand the focus and needs to be on board – no one should be left out.

- Everyone in the organization needs to understand the importance of data-driven decision making.

- Assessment-based instructional strategies and practices need to be the focus for improvement in student learning.
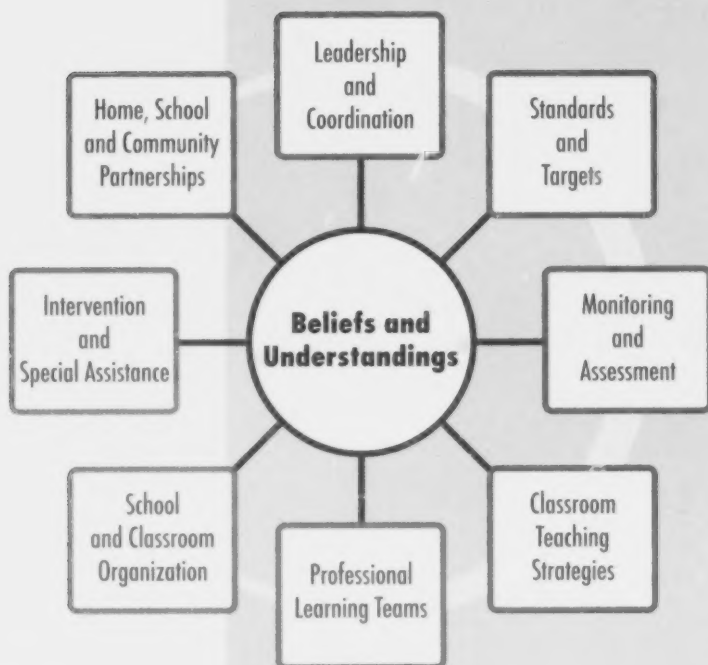
- Sustained professional development involving school teams is necessary in order to have distributed leadership; principals must be involved in the team.

- Funding needs to be in place to allow planning for more than six months to a year.

- Sustained support – financial, material, and human – is key.

- There needs to be compelling moral messaging about the initiative.

- A common language needs to be spoken by all.

- Building capacity has to take place at all levels.

- It is imperative to have curriculum coordinators develop the plan, implement the system vision, and embed a balanced literacy approach in every content session with school teams.

- Literacy is THE focus.

REFERENCES

Hill, P.W., & Crévola, C.A. (1999). The role of standards in educational reform for the 21st century. In D.D. Marsh (Ed.), *ASCD yearbook 1999: Preparing our schools for the 21st century. Alexandria*, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Mascall, B., Fullan, M., & Rolheiser, C. (2001). *The challenges of coherence and capacity: Case studies on the implementation of early literacy in York region.* Aurora, ON: York Region District School Board.

Sharratt, L., & Fullan, M. (2005). *The school district that did the right things right.* Aurora, ON: York Region District School Board.

York Region District School Board. (2005). *Reciprocal strategies for building school and district capacity.* Aurora, ON: Author.

York Region District School Board. (2002). *Curriculum and instructional services plan for continuous improvement* (2002–08). Aurora: Author.

APPENDIX A

Implementation Wheel: Hill & Crevola, 1999

Leadership and Coordination

Home, School and Community Partnerships

Standards and Targets

Intervention and Special Assistance

Beliefs and Understandings

Monitoring and Assessment

School and Classroom Organization

Professional Learning Teams

Classroom Teaching Strategies

Dr. Lyn Sharratt: Oct. 2005

APPENDIX B

Literacy Collaborative

Commitment to System Literacy Priority

1. Shared Beliefs and Understandings
2. Embedded Literacy Teachers
3. Literacy Block/Focus
4. Principal Leadership
5. Reading Recovery/ Focused Intervention
6. Case Management Approach
7. Literacy PD at Staff Meetings
8. In-School Grade/ Subject Meetings
9. Book Rooms/ Varied Resources
10. Allocation of School Budget for Literacy Resources
11. Action Research Focused on Literacy
12. Parental Involvement
13. Cross-curricular Literacy Connections

System Responsibility

- Collect, analyze, report and act on system data to inform PD needs
- Provide forums for annual reporting of progress e.g., Literacy Learning Fair
- Provide ongoing literacy content and change management sessions for school teams
- Provide differentiated support for Intensive Support Schools based on their data
- Partner with external critical friends for research and PD
- Provide opportunities for going deeper through Literacy@School, Literacy Walks, Action Research & Lesson Study

Making Connections

Site-Based Decision Making

- Use all data, including the annual report, to set performance targets for SPCI
- Prepare, and share with other schools, and partners the annual report on three LC outcomes
- Provide PD in literacy assessment and instruction based on LC sessions for all staff at staff meetings
- Establish membership in the literacy leadership team
- Provide grade teams with time for collaboration and reflection
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of whole school are determined in response to school data

Lessons Learned Thus Far

Importance of using the data to link assessment to instruction

Shared responsibility is crucial – shift from "my class/my subject" to "our students"

Key role of the administrator in the school-based literacy team

Literacy Collaborative Outcomes

Increased student achievement by:

using data for instruction and selection of resources

building teacher and administrator capacity for literacy instruction for all learners

establishing sustainable, collaborative learning communities characterized by shared leadership

Questions We Are Still Asking

How does the system effectively support schools in using data to inform decision making?

How does the system know what supports continue to be required for effective literacy instruction?

How does the system benefit from the learning that happens at the site level?

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
Le Secrétariat de la littératie et de la numératie

Printed on recycled paper

Ontario